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State To Aid Laid Off Workers

By Dan Boyd Journal Capitol Bureau

SANTA FE — Gov. Bill Richardson pledged the state's resources Friday to assist the more than 600 workers laid off Friday by Eclipse Aviation, and said that the state remains a strong supporter of the beleaguered company.

Richardson directed the New Mexico Department of Workforce Solutions to engage the state's Rapid Response Team to provide information to laidoff Eclipse employees about unemployment benefits, the possibility of finding new jobs and more.

State workforce officials plan to hold meetings with Eclipse employees on two days next week to begin that process.

The governor also called Eclipse one of the main economic development success stories of his administration, and characterized the layoffs as part of a company trying to get healthy.

"It's basically a restructuring of jobs," he said during a Friday news conference. "It's not a termination of jobs. I think they're going through a phase of needing to reduce the work force so that they can come back stronger."

The company is facing scrutiny from both a congressional committee and the Federal Aviation Administration over the way its Eclipse 500 plane was certified in September 2006.

Richardson said he's contacted Rep. James Oberstar, D-Minn., the chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, and said he plans to meet with Oberstar in Washington, D.C., in early September to discuss the inquiry.

"My objective in seeing him is to explain the strength of Eclipse," Richardson said. "I'm not going to try to change the nature of their investigation."

"In my view, Eclipse has followed proper procedures," Richardson added.

Fred Mondragon, the state's economic development secretary, said there are reasons to believe Eclipse will remain profitable.

"They still have a huge backlog," Mondragon said, citing a figure of 2,300 to 2,400 already ordered jets.

New Mexico has invested \$19 million in the company, which now employs about 1,100 people in Albuquerque.

While admitting to feeling some concern about the future viability of Eclipse, Richardson said he will help the company find additional funding and investors. The company hasn't asked the state to invest more money, he said.

Richardson also said he talked about one week ago with the company's new CEO, Roel Pieper, and was given "very strong assurances" regarding Eclipse's commitment to New Mexico.